

UNDERGROUND U.S.A.

FILMMAKING BEYOND THE HOLLYWOOD CANON

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CHAPTER 8

**'YOU BLED MY MOTHER, YOU BLED MY FATHER, BUT YOU
WON'T BLEED ME': THE UNDERGROUND TRIO OF
MELVIN VAN PEEBLES**

Garrett Chaffin-Quiray

Only as a group do the first three 'underground' feature films of Melvin Van Peebles fully express his artistic development and independence from conventional moviemaking. By focusing on *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1968), *Watermelon Man* (1970) and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) there is opportunity to consider his contribution to film history and assess his cultural importance. Indeed this frame supports the idea of him being a filmmaking pioneer by allowing an examination of the counter-hegemonic tendencies in his work along with exploring his relationship to blaxploitation cinema.

BLACK BACKGROUNDS AND FRENCH PURSUITS

Born on 21 August 1932, Melvin Van Peebles attended Township High School in the Chicago suburb of Phoenix, Illinois, where he graduated in 1949. Transferring to Ohio Wesleyan University

after one year at West Virginia State College, he graduated in 1953 with a Bachelor of Arts in English before enlisting in the US Air Force.

After starting a family and ending his military career, he spent time in Mexico where he dabbled as a painter before moving to San Francisco and employment as a cable car operator. Following the sale of his car he produced a few short films to gain a foothold in Hollywood, including *Three Pickup Men for Herrick* (1957) and *Sunlight* (1957), although an agent reportedly told him, 'If you can tap dance, I might find you some work. But that's about all.'¹

Shoring up his disappointment and capitalising on the GI Bill, he moved his family to Holland where he enrolled at the University of Amsterdam to study astronomy. While there he divorced his wife, joined a theatre troupe and started acting. To make ends meet he worked as a street performer and depended on his lady friends for support and a place to live.

Henry Langlois, founder of the Cinematheque Française, eventually saw his short films and invited Van Peebles to Paris where he spent the next nine years singing, dancing, acting and writing the novels *A Bear for the FBI*, *The Chinamen of the 14th District*, *The True American*, *The Party in Harlem* and *La Permission*. He also produced the Francophone short film *Cinq cent balles* (1963) and began seeking entry into the French feature-film market.

When he learned he could adapt one of his novels into film with a \$70,000 grant from the French Cinema Centre if he could find a producer with matching funds, he partnered with OPERA, a production team consisting of Michel Zemer, Guy Pefond and Christian Shivat, and adapted *La Permission* for the screen. The resulting feature was shot in six weeks for a cost of \$200,000 and was given the new title *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*.² The film depicts the story of an army man named Turner (Harry Baird) who receives a promotion and a three-day pass. While on leave he visits a Parisian club and meets a woman named Miriam (Nicole Berger). During their weekend together the couple explore the countryside and confront the complexities of their romantic ideals along with the bias of people around them. Once spotted by a group of his army cohorts who report what they see to their Captain (Hal Brav), Turner is demoted and confined to barracks where he remains disconnected from his lost love as the film ends.

Following the narrative pattern of a tragic love story, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* departs from generic convention by centring itself on a black man. This difference is emphasised in the early remarks of Turner's Captain, who explains that a three-day pass is being offered to him because he is 'obedient, cheerful and frightened', 'a good Negro', towards whom the Captain feels a protective connection. Delivered in direct address as Turner demurs in crosscut reaction shots, the Captain's remarks speak to Turner's status as an army cog in collusion with the white-dominated American racial hierarchy. The sequence also demonstrates his relative position at the bottom of that hierarchy.

Once released from this orderly and paternalistic world, Turner roams through the streets of Paris wearing his sunglasses with a sense of freedom in the camera's depiction of his liberty and

youth. Among his experiences he sees a puppet show about slavery and civilisation's development that emphasises his role in France as an African-descended American soldier upholding United Nations peace treaties circa 1967.

When he later enters the nightclub where he meets Miriam, Turner is positioned as the lone black figure among the lily-white dancers and club-goers who surround him. He is repeatedly refused a dancing partner until he finally asks Miriam, with whom he shares an immediate *simpatico*. Despite their initial attraction, however, other club-goers jostle them along with remarks on the colour of his skin, causing Turner to storm off saying, 'I'm not a nigger. I'm a person.'

Forced to explain how he is under constant attack from racially weighted words like 'black' and 'nigger', Miriam is shocked for having been ignorant of such signifiers but is quickly forgiven because of their French context. As Van Peebles would later comment, 'I had to keep things simple. It was intended for a French public, and they would never understand the fine points of white-negro bias in this country [the United States].'³ Speaking at the same point within the film, Turner asks, 'how can anyone think that 'black' is a compliment?' thereby developing one of the film's more remarkable departures from narrative moviemaking.

With an alternation between diegetic and non-diegetic music and occasional reliance on freeze frames, Van Peebles inserts a pair of dream states into the unravelling romance, one from each of his lead characters' point-of-view. The first concerns a plantation-like world where Miriam is set upon and ravished by Turner as a black slave. The second exists in a tribal environment where Miriam is sacrificed to a black mob and symbolically raped. Inserted in parallel to the film's action, neither of these two powerful fantasies exactly describes the lovers' situation, although it is clear theirs is not a purely innocent love story. The sequences also provides a glimpse of Van Peebles' use of folklore, racial stereotype and historical myth to enliven his story and develop layers of meaning aside from the basic aesthetic achievements of his craftsmanship.

Another powerful, though less fanciful, illustration of clashing racial identities in the film is the scene where Turner and Miriam bump into three of his fellow soldiers from the army base. Wordlessly, the tension lurking beneath their affair rises to the surface like a jack-in-the-box being sprung. Very quickly Miriam's easy acceptance of their affection is demonstrated as being ignorant of unstated social codes concerning racial segregation. Just as quickly, Turner's inability to accept his attraction to Miriam shows the ingrained effect of his assimilation into racist American institutions and attitudes.

When Turner's Captain finally demotes him in another direct address sequence, his words express the urgency of separating the black and white races. More remarkable still is the way his reprimand takes the form of a war allegory when he says:

I don't see why, just because you were on a three-day pass, you thought that you could go further than the normal two-day weekend travelling distance from the base. What would

you do on the battlefield? I'm very disappointed in you and you have to learn, to learn a lesson, all of you. Now if the only way you can learn is by the rod, then it will be by the rod. I am also restricting you to your barracks until further notice.

With jump cuts, freeze frames and dream states cross cut into the narrative action, photo montage including the use of newsreel footage and a loosely contained conceit about sexual predation between the races, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* contains the seeds of Van Peebles' later pursuits. Though these techniques are employed throughout the film, and though they disrupt the continuity of its forward action, Van Peebles serves up a very palatable romantic tale complete with attractive lead actors.

The attributes of location shooting serve as a counterpoint to the simmering racial tensions then laying waste to American urban centres and they are a strong aesthetic achievement. Unfortunately, such abstraction is also a limitation in that *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* was considered a French production and remains strangely disconnected from the American landscape it remarks on, however lightly. Still, this debut feature allowed Van Peebles to adapt one of his novels, direct the resulting film and ultimately find his way into the Hollywood fold.

VAN PEEBLES COMES TO HOLLYWOOD

At a time when divestiture and divestment of theatrical distribution channels was tearing apart the vertically integrated studio system, Hollywood executives looked for solutions to secure steady business remembered from the industry's high point in 1946. Simultaneously, other forms of leisure entertainment were competing for the discretionary income of movie patrons, perhaps most notably television, causing both the timbre and subjects of movie entertainment to change.

Unable to find an edge or formula to attract audiences, some movie producers went so far as to let their companies slide into bankruptcy. Larger conglomerates eager to make use of studio resources acquired still other movie companies to make use of their film libraries. Riding the success of his first feature, Van Peebles was invited to Hollywood to supply a dose of outsider creativity. He found himself, 'in a difficult spot as an inexperienced director who's been pressed into service by an industry that has suddenly decided, after decades of racism in its ranks, that it needs black directors.'⁴ Columbia Pictures signed him to shoot a farcical drama involving timely, contemporary issues and thus he followed in the late 1960s career paths of several black male directors like Gordon Parks with *The Learning Tree* (1969) and Ozzie Davis with *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) before him.

Based on a script by Herman Raucher with the working title *The Night the Sun Came Out*, Van Peebles scored and directed the film, this time in colour, and eventually released it under the title *Watermelon Man*. Shot in 22 days and released with a budget just under \$1 million,⁵ it tells the story of a bigoted, white insurance executive named Jeff Gerber (Godfrey Cambridge), who lords over his

liberal-leaning wife Althea (Estelle Parsons). One day he wakes up a black man. Misadventures ensue before Jeff finally takes consolation and strength in his new identity, although he ends up separated from his family and participating in a black, pseudo-military organisation.

Basically a fable of role reversal, *Watermelon Man* is also a finely crafted tale that mixes its bawdy comic ruptures with the tragic potential of its topical material. As the film opens to Jeff's morning habits as he exercises, bathes and darkens his pale white skin under the lamp of a home-tanning bed, the Gerber family resembles millions of other white families of the period. The patriarch is an extrovert who earns his living among the white-collar class while the matriarch stays at home looking after the affairs of family, hearth and home.

Among the very first conflicts in the film is a disagreement between Jeff and Althea. Captured in long shot as they watch the evening news featuring riotous blacks, Jeff is roundly intolerant while Althea expresses her sympathy for civil rights struggles. Their peace is maintained by keeping conflicts buried in the symbolic bedroom. As a result, their relationship is a metaphor for the wider American system that limits cultural conflicts through institutions of control and censorship. That the footage they watch is newsreel imagery of race riots only underscores the systemic controls in America as defined by a police force struggling to control protesting black others. This sequence also makes a point of characterising Jeff as being purposefully ignorant of the social changes going on around him. Likewise, Althea is superficially aware of these struggles yet unable to experience the levels of change, safely ensconced, as she is, behind her home's closed front door.

The moment Jeff wakes up a black man to the confluence of personal conflicts and social upheavals testifies to how personal problems become highly charged and political. Because Jeff's blackness is often played off as a gag, his transformation into the watermelon man invites audience identification with the film's lead character, especially since he participates in virtually every scene of the movie. It is also no accident that his change to being a frustrated, black revolutionary from a loudmouthed, white bigot takes place through real world experience once he leaves his domestic haven.

Still believing himself to be white Jeff faces the world and learns of racial profiling in the police force, the sex play of white women looking for big black bucks, the segregation of social clubs that no longer accept his credentials and the eventual defection of his wife and neighbours. Memorably, this last set of defections happen all at once when Jeff returns home from a day on the job at a garbage dump only to face an empty house with his family absconded to visit a far-off relative. At the same time, he is approached by a group of his white male neighbours who are interested in buying him out of their neighbourhood so they can recover lost property value.

His failed reintegration into society forces him to reconsider notions about himself, his family and his professional pursuits. Initially filled with anger, he learns to productively identify with his new racial group to become an independent insurance salesman exclusively targeting the needs of the black population. He also ends up being involved with a group of black men that resembles a revolutionary troupe of urban guerrillas.



FIGURE 10 A 'black' comedy of role reversal: *Watermelon Man*

Before this transformation is complete, however, Jeff goes through stages of shock and denial in reaction to his changing skin colour. Unable to accept the surreal switch in his material reality, Jeff assumes his home-tanning bed is to blame for the darkening of his skin. Even as he seeks satisfaction from the manufacturer with a replacement device, the bed's deliveryman mistakes him as a house thief and incites a fight before Althea intervenes to clarify the confusion. Jeff also bathes overnight in a bathtub filled with milk to no change in colour. This results in him explaining away his condition as being an incredibly deep tan that will take time to heal.

Naturally this explanation is unbelievable, but it is the launching point for Jeff's introduction into the world of racial assumptions used to denigrate black people. He finds himself associated with watermelon, fried chicken, thievery, riotous behaviour, laziness, jive talking, rape, murder, drunkenness, sexual wildness and consignment to the margins of conventional white society. Painfully he learns to accept these new rules for conduct, though with an ironic sensibility.

That Jeff was born white and was inexplicably turned black positions his understanding of the world as being both artificial and arbitrary. It is artificial because no innate law or principle lies

behind the white-dominated socio-cultural hierarchy, and it is arbitrary because the viciousness of prejudice as practiced against the black race runs counter to the basic principles of American society. As Kathleen Carroll wrote in a review of the film, 'There is nothing laughable about these situations and the film becomes only more and more irritating. The one thing one can say for it is that it doesn't compromise. Cambridge ends by accepting his new role as a black.'⁶

It is this relationship between the film's star and his diegetic world that racialises a viewer's identification as being white to feel outrage at Jeff's treatment when he becomes a black man. Society's racist unfairness only becomes convincing in light of his basic whiteness, one that exposes core racial assumptions at the heart of America since Godfrey Cambridge is, after all, a black man.

Because Cambridge's Jeff Gerber is first introduced in white make-up and because another black man directed the film, there is a basic rupture at the centre of the text. This rupture exists between the white-washed sentiment of Hollywood executives hoping to achieve box-office success from potentially divisive topic material in contrast to Van Peebles' counter-hegemonic vision suggested by aspects of the film and its central performance. Indeed, part-way through production Van Peebles was nearly forced to film an alternative ending where Jeff wakes up to realise that his racial reversal was merely fantasy. Unconvinced of this false sentiment, Van Peebles refused to shoot the alternate ending in favour of a final, more militant address that supports the examination of racial role reversals enacted by the film.

In this way, some of the stylistic choices of Van Peebles' first feature show up again in *Watermelon Man*. Among them is the use of jump cuts, cutaways during dialogue as visual counter-points to the action, repeated shots and coloured filters to heighten the melodramatic impact of the film's themes. Together these stylistic choices point in the direction of an alternative, non-Hollywood form for Van Peebles' first feature film, but these same devices also serve to heighten the excitement of this film too, the most mainstream and, perhaps, the most entertaining of his body of work. As Cynthia Gillespie commented at the time of the film's release, 'One should appreciate the Van Peebles style – energetic, militant and a little rough around the edges.'⁷

Using such devices as contrapuntal sound, direct address and found footage within the narrative itself, Van Peebles delivers on the promise of difference from the industry's stock-in-trade that was requested by his studio masters. Offering small reversals of form and substance in the way his second feature continues to grapple with racial themes that were then current, his movie succeeds in spicing up the tired content of the domestic melodrama. This excitement also helped to extend the movie's audience by exposing audiences to black actors like Godfrey Cambridge as well as in casting historically important actors like D'Urville Martin and Mantan Moreland in supporting roles.

By first experimenting with form and content in *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* and then extending his technical craft to target a wider audience in *Watermelon Man*, Van Peebles' effort paid

off in rewarding his outsider's dilemma of acquiring the material advantages of Hollywood while also carving space to explore a more independent vision. With the culmination of his cinematic style liberated from the usual production circumstances on his third feature film, Van Peebles once again focused on questions of racial identity and cultural conflict to produce his most famous work.

RATED 'X' BY AN ALL-WHITE JURY: SWEETBACK'S REVOLT

Dedicated 'to all the Brothers and Sisters who had enough of the man', Melvin Van Peebles used his director's salary from *Watermelon Man* to fund 19 days of production for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in late 1970. Budgeted at \$500,000 and, at one point, infused with a \$50,000 loan from Bill Cosby, Van Peebles wrote, directed, co-produced, scored, edited and starred in his most unconventional film to date.

To keep costs low he hired non-union labour, labelled the film a porn production and took on much of the marketing responsibilities himself using the production company 'Yeah, Inc.' He also released the film through Cinemation, an exploitation movie distributor, to eschew traditional distribution channels by pumping money into radio advertisements targeting black audiences to merchandise both the film and its soundtrack album.⁸

After five and half months of editing and an X-rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, Van Peebles threatened lawsuits against Jack Valenti and the MPAA but used their reaction for his own ends. Employing the catchphrase, 'rated X by an all-white jury', he tagged the film's posters and advertisements and printed T-shirts for an added boost to the film's ancillary markets. He also manufactured nightgowns, sweatshirts emblazoned with the phrase 'I am Sweetback', a paperback book and the Mama's Tub Red and Mama's Tub White table wines.⁹

Released to acclaim and disdain in the black community and the white mainstream, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* took the top box-office position from Arthur Hiller's *Love Story* (1970) for two full weeks. Depending on the estimates, it also went on to earn between \$4.1 and \$11 million in theatrical rentals,¹⁰ along with producing certain symbols, scenes and stock characters that would prove central to mainstream Hollywood for the rest of the 1970s.

The film opens with a medieval truth claim that reads, 'Sire, these lines are not an homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn from the mouth of reality.' Continuing on to detail Sweetback's background as a feral child raised among prostitutes, the action jumps forward to see him performing as a stud in a kind of backroom minstrel show. When he witnesses police brutality practised against a young black revolutionary named Mu-Mu (Hubert Scales), Sweetback defends the younger man and is forced to flee from the authorities for his outrageous conduct. Through the rest of the film he races towards Mexico and is helped along the way by members of the black community.

After finally making good his escape, viewers are warned, 'Watch Out. A baadasssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues.'

According to Donald Bogle, Thomas Cripps, Ed Guerrero and Mark Reid among others,¹¹ *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is generally listed as the pivot film for blaxploitation cinema. Writing contemporaneously to the film's release, Penelope Gilliatt suggested in 1971:

Sweetback is presumably the first of a line of films. The next ones will get gentler, with luck, and better characterised, and signed with a clearer authorship than this, but they can never be anything like *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*, or lose the tongue they have found here, which is a shock in the cinema.¹²

However, this perspective ignores other influential mainstream films released during the same period, not least of which was *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971). Therefore, to claim *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* as the foundation for blaxploitation and its high points in such fare as *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972) and *Willie Dynamite* (Gilbert Moses, 1974) is too simplistic. What Van Peebles' film did manage to convey was the interest and viability of black cultural products independently produced by, and for, a primarily black audience. Among Hollywood producers and financiers alike, this notion was percolating with an understanding that, 'given the right film ... the black audience can be the biggest movie-going public in America'.¹³

In 1971, Melvin Van Peebles managed to tune his filmmaking to the pulse of his times with an uncanny sense of how to affirm his sense of black community while entertaining that audience with images and sounds largely marginalised in the mainstream cinema. As he was later quoted on the subject, 'the first move for a disenfranchised people is a sense of self.'¹⁴

By acquiring the necessary skills for renovating genre structures and playing with social satire in his first two feature films, Van Peebles was freer to revolt against conventional form and content. Foremost among his goals in this effort was not adhering mainstream standards about how black people were being represented. He also wanted to ensure that *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* would look and sound as good as industry standards required. Plus he wanted to provoke and entertain his primary audience of other black Americans, his 'constituency' as he called them,¹⁵ and he wanted his film to be a standard-bearer for making theatrical films outside Hollywood. Expanding on this final point, Van Peebles wrote:

The recognition of the correlation between image and destiny is not new, what is new for black third world and disenfranchised people is the means for putting their realities before the mass audience. But now more and more brothers and sisters are snatching this power and the job of reclaiming the minds of people, especially black people has begun. Anyway that's why I'm into images and mirrors.¹⁶

Pursuit of these four goals departs from mainstream cinematic practices and means the resulting movie satisfies a different set of critical reactions. Lacking the polish of a well-made plot, the expertise of highly trained actors, actresses and production staff, and the reach of an homogenising marketing team to shape the overall product, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is a challenging and difficult picture.

The film's success lay in its ghetto view of black American experience put front and centre for cinematic entertainment without isolating such experiences along the margins of plot and action. Sweetback's flight from the police into the seams of illegitimate commerce, including backroom sex showcases, whorehouses, gambling dens, voodoo churches and halfway houses for political revolutionaries is treated seriously, as are the people he encounters along the way. Emphasising this typically overlooked segment of the black community also positively valued this subculture by affirming the connections between social transgression and forms of criminal conduct.

With just over ninety minutes running time, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* lays out the main points of its plot within the film's first third. Through the second third that roughly details Sweetback's adventures in Los Angeles, he visits his nominal boss, an old girlfriend, a community church, a gambling den and a forested hideaway and ends his adventures, in the final third of the film, running from the law. As a sexual man raised in a whorehouse and able to wield his libido as the tool of his stud's life, having sex with various women helps him avoid conversation and forces a relentless quality of movement into his quest for freedom. Not to be forgotten, his sexuality also gives rise to an objectifying sexism layered throughout the film.

As a cinematic rebel, Sweetback is a stoic black hero. He takes action unlike his forebears, Jeff Gerber and Turner, who struggled to communicate through the difficulties of prejudice running rampant in their world. Sweetback is a man born at the bottom rung of society yet he is able to understand injustice by recognising how a politically active militant like Mu-Mu is the future of his race and culture. Unfortunately, Van Peebles' talents as an actor undercut the impact of this one-note hero and make him out to be less a man than a somewhat laughable masculine prototype.

Because his character was rendered one-dimensional, his image along with the more commercially viable John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) became instantly synonymous with black machismo in 1971. The use of such cinematic devices as contrapuntal sound, reversed negatives, animation, freeze frames, split frames, superimposition, direct address, photo montage, location shooting and scene repetition further enhanced the look of this new black man and how he was framed on-screen. Importantly these visual and aural motifs became a sign of the times.

Where these same devices were used to explore inter-racial romance in *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* and then exploded to look at the social reversals of *Watermelon Man*, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* uses them to define a new style substituted for mainstream conventions. Its collection of technical idiosyncrasies and stylistic flourishes imbue it with an alternative experience as much through the chance encounters of its independent production circumstances as by the planned values

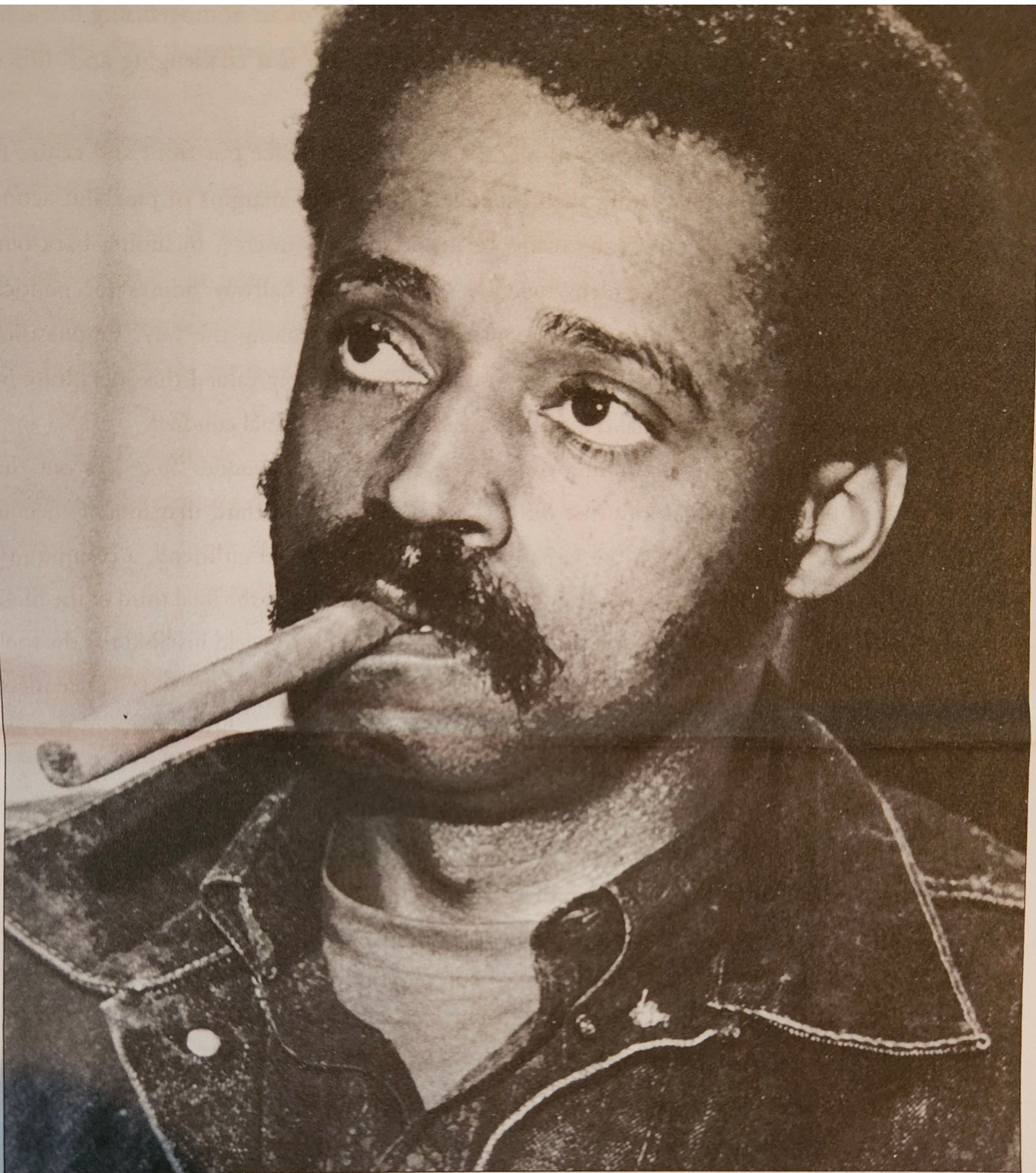


FIGURE 11 The director as black rebel: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*

of any consistent set of themes. This departure helped substantiate an already existing bond between political representations in fiction films and the needs of an under-represented movie-going audience to watch and connect with on-screen characters and their struggles.

Thinking critically of the film in its release, however, Vincent Canby surmised, 'Instead of dramatising injustice, Van Peebles merchandises it.'¹⁷ His point was that Van Peebles readily performed the steps of exploiting a truly revolutionary, and independent, vision of blackness

by rendering the most obvious white stereotypes about black people as the continuing basis for commercial cinema. Clayton Riley agreed with Canby's sentiment in that, 'black people had been stung by the movie's relentless vulgarity and Van Peebles' apparent obsession with the ruined landscapes of black life. And the outrage has a solid point, there is little positive black imagery in *Sweet Sweetback*'.¹⁸

Implicit in these dissenting opinions from the celebratory remarks promoted during the film's release and its subsequent glorification in later film histories is the importance of black popular films for carrying the burden of reversing white dominated racial hierarchies. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* does engage this kind of reversal by emphasising a sovereign black cinematic voice. However, Van Peebles was actually most successful in recognising the economic lessons of the movie industry and then using these lessons to his advantage by producing one of the most notorious films of the 1970s.

Thus, the film is open to being considered the one movie that targeted black spectatorship as never before in the popular cinema. One can accept this proposition while also subjecting it to the scrutiny of a wider critical reaction. Lerone Bennett, Jr. took up such a position (or which his efforts are laudable) when he wrote a cautionary article about the film's impact and popularity:

Sweet Sweetback ... is a trivial and tasteless negative classic: trivial and tasteless because of the banality of conception and execution; a negative classic, because it is an obligatory step for anyone who wants to go further and make the first black revolutionary film.¹⁹

That Hollywood paid attention to the period's black cultural products and influences lends credence to the commonly held belief about how the mainstream immediately ransacked *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. It exported his stoic black male lead, the use of popular music, underworld surroundings and the inclusion of sexually explicit and violent sequences. The idea is given further weight through the sheer repetition of Sweetback's adventures that later became cliché-ridden in the blaxploitation cycle, but this commonly held belief is coincident, rather than causal, in nature.

It is true that Hollywood did Van Peebles one better by conventionalising his story about an urban outlaw through film after film after film. It is also true that Hollywood was already releasing such work when Van Peebles was producing his third feature. Therefore, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is not primarily important for having turned the film industry on its ear. Instead, the film's legacy is the demonstration of artistic ingenuity, including the development of alternative distribution channels and marketing practices. Van Peebles' reversal of the dominant system was in pitching the terms of movie financing to his advantage even while his films responded to similar cues and influences then affecting mainstream products along with works outside the commercial fold. By accepting these influences and refocusing them Van Peebles also managed to imbue his film with an increased sensitivity that was exceptionally appealing to black moviegoers.

CONCLUSION

With a body of work that includes novels, stage musicals, plays and soundtrack albums, Melvin Van Peebles' first three feature films centre on the subjects of racial identity and the cultural clash of blackness within a white-dominated American system. This twinned thematic fuels his work and develops alternative appeals running in parallel to the mainstream culture that proved immediately translatable into action-adventure formulae for the newly fomenting commercial purpose in blaxploitation cinema.

That Van Peebles' counter-hegemonic efforts were popular in their own right is a matter for the historical record. The very fact of how cinema history remembers *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, though, and to the exclusion of very much regard for his earlier features, suggests two peculiar tendencies. On the one hand, there is the promotion of a great man theory that lacks historical context or a discussion of artistic development across a body of work. On the other hand, there is an on-going historical effort to emphasise his third film as the birthplace for blaxploitation, an effort that simplifies the complexity of independent and mainstream cinemas in the 1960s and 1970s while also minimising this important work and the cycle of films generally, though improperly, considered to be its result.

In part this tendency is due to the controversy surrounding *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and films of its ilk that capitalised on a paucity of images appealing to an under-represented black American population. It is also due to the backlash against Melvin Van Peebles for having the audacity to write, direct, co-produce, score, edit and star in a film that so directly inflames its viewers but was never eclipsed in force of popularity or influence by any of his subsequent cinematic work.

The elevation of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* recognises the commercial importance of black film representations in the late 1960s and early 1970s but it also disregards the political and cultural importance of other films from the period. Regardless, Van Peebles' politics, aesthetics and context remain for us as the incendiary images and sounds of his recorded body of work. Likewise his first three feature films have an amateurish quality that intentionally interrupted the dominant forms for representing cinematic subjects, but most especially black American cinematic subjects.

The persistent attraction of *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, *Watermelon Man* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* to new audiences through time invites continued investigation and on-going re-evaluation. This persistence of influence is also an indication of how films, and their filmmakers, can be formed and re-formed by their changing historical contexts.